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# THE DEGENERACY OF THE GERMAN ARMY.

BY WOLF VON SCHIERBRAND.

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SOMETIMES the unexpected does happen. A small book, the literary firstling of a simple lieutenant of the line, has deeply stirred all classes in Germany. Even the national parliament, the Reichstag, has discussed it with much feeling. There is but one way to account for this: the reason for the profound anxiety felt is that this little book publicly and in plain language speaks out momentous truths about the German army, "the most cherished legacy" left him by his grandfather, as the Kaiser described it—truths which thousands had whispered before, but none had dared to speak aloud. The author of the book was promptly brought before a court-martial, sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, and dismissed from the army. His judges did not deny the fidelity of the portrait drawn by Lieutenant Bilse, but punished him rather because of it. For the same reason, too, the court ordered all the plates of the book and all the copies of it to be destroyed and its sale forbidden within the Empire. As a method of preventing its circulation, this measure failed wholly of its purpose.

What, then, does the book tell?

It presents in the guise of fiction—very thinly veiled fiction, indeed—a faithful picture of life in a German garrison of to-day, delineating the loose discipline and the looser living of officers and men. It shows pitilessly their total lack of ideals; the complete indifference of the officers to their profession; their incessant gaming and excessive drinking; the absence of intellectual pleasures and efforts, and the general engulfment in the grossest amusements and dissipations; the load of ever-accumulating debts under which nearly everybody groans; the miserable dependence of the officers on the forbearance of the army usurers

in Berlin or Cologne; and the striving to escape the gathering meshes of the drag-net by a "money-marriage," that being the sole escape possible from ultimate ruin and disgrace.

If the picture is a true one—and it was admitted to be true even by the members of the court-martial which condemned the young author; nay, more, even by the complaining witnesses, who recognized themselves in the figures of the tale, and who have since challenged Bilse to mortal combat to avenge the deadly insult of being held up to public ignominy—the German army is no longer what it has been universally supposed to be, namely, a model of strict discipline and of Spartan virtue. It is rather the reverse. And that invites a comparison.

Frederick the Great died in 1786, his army the finest in Europe. He had stood at bay, during a succession of wars which consumed more than half his reign of forty-six years, against the whole of Continental Europe, and he had vanquished his foes *seriatim* with his matchless band of veterans. Exactly twenty years after his death, Napoleon defeated the Prussians at Jena, routing them so utterly that Prussia tumbled like a house of cards. The monarchy practically ceased to exist for seven years, and Prussia, as a political and military power, was thrust back for fifty years to the second or third rank. Only 1866 and the battle of Sadowa restored her prestige. It was in recalling these days of contrite humiliation that the present Kaiser said, addressing his brilliant gathering of generals in the Hall of Glories at Berlin, on New Year's Day, 1900:

"The glorious soldiers of Frederick the Great had fallen asleep on their laurels, ossified in the trivial details of a senseless, antiquated drill; led by superannuated, unready, and unwarlike generals; their officers no longer used to serious work, and degenerated by luxury, sloth, and blind self-glorification. In a word, the army no longer sufficed for its task. It had forgotten its task. Severe was the punishment meted out to it by Heaven, a punishment which likewise chastised our people. Thrown into the dust were we. Frederick's fame paled, and his glorious banners were broken. In the seven long years of our hard servitude God taught our people to gather new strength."

Brave and timely words these, but it may be doubted if William II. had any idea that he was addressing a body of men who themselves fitted in rather closely with the description given of the men of 1806, that he, personally, is rapidly bringing the German

army to the sorry plight he spoke of? The parallel between conditions in 1806 and those in 1904 is a striking one. Pride goeth before a fall. The vainglorious, dissolute, overbearing, cowardly Prussian *junkers* and soldiers of 1806 have their counterparts in those of to-day. This has been pointed out before now in Germany, and has often been the subject of prophecy in the Reichstag itself. But ears have been deaf and eyes have been blind in the circles most concerned.

No one who has of recent years resided in Germany, who has had occasion to consort with the army there and has closely observed it, can have failed to remark its rapid decadence. Those dreadful diseases which are the punishment consequent on loose living are tainting officers and men alike to an incredible extent. In the military hospitals, the overwhelming majority of the patients are sufferers from such disorders. The French army during the Second Empire was not worse in this respect.

Gaming and betting are indulged in to an enormous extent in army circles. The Union Club and the Jockey Club in Berlin, both largely composed of officers, are perhaps the worst centres of fashionable dissipation in the Empire. High stakes are played for, tens of thousands often changing hands in a single night, the favorite games being *vingt-et-un*, *baccarat*, *écarté*, *poker*, *lansquenet* and others. It is at these clubs, and at the hundreds of smaller ones in the provinces, that the fatal taste for gaming and betting is first acquired, leading in many cases to disgrace, expatriation or suicide. The complete financial ruin of five of the oldest and most renowned Prussian noble families was accomplished at one of the above clubs in the course of a single season, not very long ago.

With this, too, there is an enormous amount of hard drinking. German army officers make French brandy their favorite tipple, or the regulation mess-punch, composed of a mixture of champagne, brandy, curaçoa, and rum—a mixture, by the way, said to have been invented by the Kaiser. At the innumerable banquets, luncheons, birthday fêtes of the sovereign or his family, of regimental chiefs, etc., and at the anniversary celebrations of battles in which particular regiments or corps distinguished themselves in the past, hard and fast drinking is the fashion, and failure to observe it is an unpardonable crime. Besides all this, luxury in its general aspects has obtained a firm foothold in the German

army everywhere. Out of every hundred officers, at least ninety live beyond their means.

As a dire result of all this, usury and "money-marriages" have become established features in life. It would require too much space to go into details, interesting enough as these are in themselves. Let it be enough to say that every garrison town in Germany is cursed by the presence of leeches, who first induce young and reckless officers to borrow on apparently easy terms, and next manipulate with diabolical cunning until they have involved their victims, and more especially the innocent families of their victims, so seriously as to lead usually to one of three alternatives: to the settlement of the debt, including an outrageous interest, a thing that burdens the paternal estate, family fortune, or salary expectations for many years, or the retirement of the officer in question; to the contracting of a "money-marriage," so called, which ties the young spendthrift to an unloved but richly dowered damsel (or widow), frequently with questionable family connections; or, lastly, to the summary dismissal and disgrace of the luckless wight, often to suicide or to crime. The whole German army is honeycombed with more or less sad cases of this description. So many scions of the fairest and oldest families in the Empire have, while serving in the army, fallen inextricably into the snares of these professional usurers, and have wedded a vulgar daughter of a *nouveau riche*, that but few of the ancient houses do not show to-day a commingling of "financial," especially Jewish financial, blood. That, however, is a matter about which there may well be two opinions. The great number of such mercenary matches, and their steady increase, have materially added to the lowering of moral standards in the army.

Against this whole train of evils the Kaiser, it is true, fulminates decrees and army orders. He did so for the first time on March 29th, 1890, when he issued a general army order in which, first, he stated that "not alone birth can to-day, as it did formerly, exclusively entitle to the prerogative of furnishing the officers for my army," and that the future of his army "rests also on the sons of estimable citizen families with whom the reverence for king and fatherland . . . is nurtured and cherished." He added:

"I strongly disapprove the idea that any officer in my army is to be estimated according to the size of his home allowance. On the contrary,

I rank in my mind those regiments the highest whose officers know how to do their full duty, joyously and with alacrity, and who nevertheless receive but modest allowances from their families. This is in accord with old Prussian traditions. I desire with all my heart that my officers, their duty done, shall enjoy life. But the growing luxury in the army must be seriously and persistently opposed."

During the eighties, and again during the nineties, occurred several unsavory trials in the army, brought about by huge scandals attendant on the ruin and disgrace of many young officers due to reckless card-playing. The worst of these was the one at Hanover, which led to the discharge from the army of scores, including one of the Kaiser's aides-de-camp. On February 23d, 1899, the Kaiser issued a decree to the army in which he said:

"Late occurrences have shown me again the frequency of dishonest but alluring offers made by professional money-lenders to the officers of my army. . . . I demand the use of every means to keep such temptations away from my officers. My previous order of July 5, 1888, must remain before every officer's eyes as the expression of my deliberate will. I herewith ordain that henceforth each and every officer be bound to report to his superiors all offers of corrupt money transactions which shall reach him. . . ."

Yet the Kaiser himself is largely—one might almost say solely—responsible for the present highly unsatisfactory condition of his army, a condition which these and subsequent orders have done nothing to improve. It is well known how, by his personal example, he encourages luxurious living among his corps of officers. He attends annually scores of officers' festivities which are always costly and usually marked by excessive drinking, swaggering talk and unhealthy sycophancy. The toasts on these occasions breathe, as a rule, the spirit of reckless bravado now so rampant throughout Germany, and especially in the army. In this, too, as the world knows, the present Kaiser has too often furnished his people an example. His speeches during the troubles in China, wild and almost raving in their lack of restraint, are still unforgotten in this connection.

But his demoralizing influence on the army goes much further than that. There has never been a monarch on the throne of Prussia who has been such a spendthrift, nor one so fond of expensive court festivities and lavish personal display, and for him to preach to his young officers strict economy seems a ludicrous paradox. It is notorious, for instance, that the members of his

large military household, including aides-de-camp, are of necessity compelled to spend a great deal of money in order to keep up with the requirements he exacts. Each one of them must, out of his own pocket, provide for a stableful of blooded horses, and other things in proportion. Under his grandfather, whom he claims to pattern after, things in this respect were different.

Thus, morally, the present German army has, assuredly, sadly deteriorated. But that is not all, nor is this the point which most concerns Germany's allies or opponents. The efficiency of the army, too, has seriously suffered. It is not difficult to find the reasons. First, all the trusted and able men that had slowly risen before 1866 are gone. Not one is left. The Kaiser would have none of them remain in active service. He called this "rejuvenating" the army, a process of rapidly weeding out all the battle-scarred and experienced commanders. The process has left none but totally untried men in every post of importance, men neither very able nor at all willing to criticise or to withstand the Kaiser's whimsical innovations. The presence of the paladins of his grandfather, men who had borne the brunt of battle and demonstrated their mettle and their capacity, was irksome to him. The army, indeed, is to-day commanded by an Emperor who knows absolutely nothing of practical warfare from personal experience. The youngest lieutenant in France, Russia, England and the United States knows more of actual fighting than he. He has never as much as witnessed a skirmish, let alone an engagement or a battle, and that means volumes in the case of a German Kaiser, whose title of "Commander-in-Chief" is not nominal, as it is in the case of several other sovereigns, but really means all it seems to mean, viz., the chief and untrammelled command over all the forces of the Empire by land and sea. And the officers serving under him are just as ignorant of real war as he. They are, without exception, men who have grown to manhood since the war with France, thirty-three years ago. The achievements and the teachings of a Moltke or Roon, of the "Red Prince" or of "Unser Fritz," of Blumenthal and all the others among the undaunted band that stood around the modest, plain, taciturn old Emperor William I., are nothing but so much printer's ink to them. Again, both the weapons with which the wars of the future will be fought, and the radical change in tactics and in strategy that must result from the employment of smokeless

powder and long-range guns and rifles, are new elements, untested on a large scale. Has the Kaiser and have his young generals adapted themselves to these changes? I very much fear not.

It is matter of common knowledge that the Kaiser, from his strong love of the spectacular, has taught his army, at every great manœuvre held since his accession in 1888, not to fight as they will have to fight in a future war in order to win, namely, in accordance with the very different tactics made necessary by the general adoption of modern weapons—tactics, it will be remembered, to learn which cost England many thousands of lives and untold millions in money on the veldts and on the kopjes of South Africa. Instead, he has taught them to fight as if the old smooth-bores were still in use. And his generals, his military advisers, and, of course, his subalterns, have supinely acquiesced. His massing of cavalry and his insane cavalry and infantry charges, in serried ranks, up steep hills and over vast territories swept by the enemy's fire for long distances, have been the amazement of all competent judges—of every foreign general witnessing these displays, which are magnificent as purely military spectacles, but far worse than useless as a mimicry of actual war conditions. At the big Fall manœuvres, a couple of years ago, when American officers fresh from the Philippines were present as eye-witnesses, I had it from the lips of one of the latter: "If the Kaiser means to tackle the enemy in that style in the next war, not a man or horse of them will reach their destination." His strategy has been ridiculed in secret by every German officer of ability, and openly by many distinguished foreign ones. The newspapers in Germany, as strongly as they dared, have commented on it in uncompromising terms. But there has come no change. For fifteen years, the German army has been taught, in sham battle, to attack an imaginary enemy on conditions and in a manner which would invite complete annihilation in actual warfare.

Next to that stands the gruesome chapter of the abuse of power by officers and non-commissioned officers in the German army exercised toward their subordinates, the rank and file. On February 15th, 1890, the Kaiser issued a cabinet order dealing with this evil. It was addressed to the Minister of War, and said:

"In my army every soldier is to be treated according to law, justly and humanely. Only thus is it possible to inspire him with zeal and devotion to duty, and love and respect for his superiors."



This order had been directly occasioned by the fact that Prince George of Saxony (now the ruling sovereign of that country), in his capacity of military inspector of a large part of the Prussian army, had remarked the prevalence of cruel and brutal treatment of soldiers by their superiors, especially by the subaltern and non-commissioned officers, and had drawn the Kaiser's attention to it. It cannot be said, however, that this particular order, or similar ones since issued by the Kaiser, have eradicated or even diminished this cancer, as many trials and incidents in the recent past have proven. The vicious and debasing custom of officers in cruelly and often brutally maltreating their defenceless subordinates has frequently led to Reichstag interpellations and long-winded discussions. As a rule, shortly after the convening of the national parliament, every late autumn, the topic is brought up by the Liberals and Socialists, sometimes even by supporters of the present government, and each successive Minister of War rises, and defends as best he may the army authorities on that score, invariably promising reform. That was done again last December; the new Minister of War (for, as a rule, the Kaiser changes his men in that office every twelvemonth), General von Einem, admitted that during the past year fifty officers and 577 non-commissioned officers had been convicted and punished for fiendishly abusing their authority. As scarcely one case of such misuse of power in a hundred is brought to the notice of military courts (and this for obvious reasons), these figures are simply appalling. Nearly every day items may be read in the German press like the following, cabled here on December 14th last:

"A thousand specifications of cruelty are made against Lieutenant Schilling, of the Ninety-eighth Regiment of Infantry, whose trial began at Metz to-day. . . ."

Two days later, the same Associated Press correspondent reported a similar case, only worse, wherein a sergeant named Franzki, of the Eighty-Fifth Infantry, figured with 1520 counts of maltreatment, and abuse of authority on 100 counts. These, however, are but ordinary cases. There have been not a few in recent years where conviction was had for tormenting luckless private soldiers to death. And, strange to say—I mean, strange in view of the Kaiser's repeated stringent orders and of the horror

with which he professes to regard such offences — punishment is in nearly all cases mild and curiously inadequate. For practising tortures worse and more ingenious than those practised by Indians here in days of yore, tortures which ended fatally for nine of the men under his charge, one young officer last year received but a six months' sentence of confinement in a fortress, a species of confinement not deemed dishonorable among his class; and, what is still more strange, after serving out a single month of this sentence this fiend was pardoned by Imperial clemency. The effect of such treatment, in these days of world-wide humanitarian effort, on the morale of the German army and on the sentiment of the nation as a whole may be imagined. To get the full bearing of this remark, it must always be kept in mind that active military service is universal and compulsory in Germany, and that this system of baiting and maltreatment is well-nigh the rule in the German army.

Another feature of this whole question, and in some respects the most important of all, must still be touched upon. I refer to the attitude of the army, more especially of the corps of officers, toward the bulk of the nation, the civilian part, the part which supports the whole army out of the proceeds of the heavy taxes wrung from a patient people. That attitude is not paralleled among the other civilized nations of the world. The officer is a demigod in Germany. He is, socially, first. He outshines not only in his own eyes (which would be natural enough), but in those of the whole nation, any other class or body of men, being set up on a pedestal and worshipped by silly maidens and sillier parents. He outranks, in a country where official rank is everything, the brightest galaxy of dignitaries, and leaves the grave and immaculate German professor far, far behind, in the race for popular favor.

That, then, is the way in which the civilian portion of the nation looks upon the military portion—as being unapproachably superior. The natural corollary is, that the officers themselves regard the “mere civilians” as distinctly their inferiors, regard them with contempt as the vulgar herd, much as the Spartans of old regarded the helots. This attitude of mind is, it is undeniable, greatly fostered by the Kaiser and by the whole government class of the Empire, who never tire inculcating the lesson that to “wear the king's coat” is the greatest distinction that can be

conferred on a mortal. On November 15th, 1894, the Kaiser, in addressing a body of recruits for the Guards, said:

“ . . . Do not forget that you wear the coat of your king. Honor that coat, and keep in mind that you have been deemed worthy to discharge your service before my eyes, and that by entering the army you have become nobles. . . .”

Is, then, the insolent bearing, the more or less acute disdain, with which the officers hold themselves aloof from the common rabble, the every-day, taxpaying yahoo, to be wondered at?

But, indeed, there are other factors tending in the same direction. One of them is the striking difference in the ethical codes governing the conduct of army officers and of the civilian population. One of these differences is to be found in the duel as an institution. Little by little, mortal combat has been eliminated from the German civilian's life as the method of final settlement of questions of honor. But in the army, thanks to the Kaiser, who, like all the Hohenzollerns, has been bred in the belief that the duel is the only satisfactory manner of avenging insults, this remnant of mediæval nonsense has survived. His much-talked-of decree, some years ago, merely sought to still further regulate the army duel by bringing it, in nearly all cases, under the preliminary notice of a “court of honor,” so called, meeting *ad hoc*. The number of army duels has slightly decreased, but duelling has gained in respectability by thus being formally sanctioned by the sovereign commander. And there is another point. Besides the 25,000 officers in the active army, there are some 43,000 officers of the “reserve,” who, in case of war, would likewise be called to arms and receive commands in the reserve corps. These men, by that very fact, must also adhere throughout life, and in their civilian relations, to every paragraph of the military code of honor, as distinguished from the ordinary civilian one. That leads to very frequent and most unpleasant complications, on which I do not propose to dwell here. The curious fact is thus presented that the Kaiser, being both Commander-in-Chief of the army and civil chief of the whole nation, not only encourages but renders obligatory, in certain contingencies, the breaking of the laws which he has sworn to uphold. What is more, he unfailingly pardons both challenger and challenged of a duelling party after they have served a small share of their ludicrously

lenient sentence, a sentence which, even in instances where one or the other of the offenders has been killed, seldom exceeds a few months of honorable retirement in a military fort.

The peculiar code of the officers, and their whole mental attitude towards civilians, lead frequently to such tragedies as the one in which Lieutenant von Brüsewitz played an unenviable part a few years ago; or like the one in which a young naval lieutenant, recently, slaughtered in cold blood an old schoolmate and fellow townsman for no worse offence than what he considered a too familiar form of salute. There are many other features equally strange and unpleasant growing out of this broad cleavage, in sentiment and standards, between the professional soldier element and the remaining overwhelmingly larger bulk of the people; but enough has been shown to suggest a state of affairs in Germany which cannot fail to work untold mischief.

The German army, then, judged by every rule that governs modern life, is in a bad way. But quite a large percentage of the ills it suffers from are curable. If the Kaiser showed in this matter a tithe of the energy and common sense that distinguish him in some other respects, he could achieve much good in ameliorating, or perhaps in utterly reforming, these conditions. Unfortunately, the Kaiser is, though in some respects progressive enough, in others a thorough-paced reactionary. There is no sign of an intention on his part to grapple in earnest with the crying evils which have been painted, but rather the reverse. His earlier ardor for army reforms has cooled. The pardons and remissions he so frequently grants to even the worst offenders, to the Brüsewitzes and their ilk, augur ill for the future. It is to be feared that some day there will be a rude awakening for Germany; for his son, the young Crown-Prince, has also been carefully nurtured in these false traditions and in wrong ideals of the past. Will it require another Jena to restore that robustness of moral fibre to the German army which was probably the most important factor that led it on from victory to victory in the gigantic struggle with France a generation ago?

WOLF VON SCHIERBRAND.